Disruptive History: Reflections from a Siberian Interdisciplinary Research Lab

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Abstract: In the late 2010s a Russian business school launched a radical experiment in higher education. The School of Advanced Studies (SAS) in Tyumen was intended as a ground-breaking greenfield project, hiring researchers to work in interdisciplinary teams and address problems of relevance to the widest possible audience. Within this environment, an exciting new strain of revisionism emerged: Disruptive History, which aimed to challenge some of the core methods and principles of the field, while using the past to upend and reframe discussions in other branches of the humanities. Giving an intellectual genealogy of this experiment, in this article I trace its origins to two separate discussions taking place among the post-Superpowers in the 1990s. Exploring these two seemingly disparate ideas — the logic of disruption, first diagnosed at Harvard Business School, and the logic of Methodology, which influenced Russian intellectual and political culture in the immediate post-Soviet era — I show how they fused to create the unusual research ethos of our school. And, by reflecting on the historical scholarship produced at SAS Tyumen, I offer a candid analysis of the general historical principles they suggested. At work in this experiment, I suggest, was not just a critique of traditional methodologies, but also an affirmative sense that history must be seen as a chain of radical transformations.

Keywords: disruptive history; interdisciplinarity; methodology; post-Soviet.

Rezumat: La sfârșitul anilor 2010, o școală de studii economice și gestiunea afacerilor din Rusia a lansat un experiment radical în învățământul superior. Școala de Studii Avansate (SAS) din Tyumen a fost concepută ca un proiect inovator, angajând cercetători pentru a lucra în echipe interdisciplinare și a aborda probleme relevante pentru un public cât mai larg posibil. În acest context, a apărut o nouă tendință interesantă de revizionism: istoria disruptivă, care avea ca scop să conteste unele dintre metodele și principiile de bază ale domeniului, utilizând în același timp

SUBB Historia, Volume 70, Special Issue 1, November 2025
doi: 10.24193/subbhist.2025.sp.iss.1.09

trecutul pentru a răsturna și a reformula discuțiile din alte ramuri ale științelor umaniste. Prezentând genealogia intelectuală a acestui experiment, în acest articol urmăresc originile acestui fenomen până la două discuții separate care au avut loc între superputeri în anii 1990. Explorând aceste două idei aparent disparate – logica perturbării, diagnosticată pentru prima dată la Harvard Business School, și logica metodologiei, care a influențat cultura intelectuală și politică rusă în perioada imediat post-sovietică – arăt cum s-au contopit pentru a crea etosul de cercetare neobișnuit al școlii noastre. Și, reflectând asupra cercetării istorice produse la SAS Tyumen, ofer o analiză sinceră a principiilor istorice generale pe care le-au sugerat. În acest experiment, sugerez, nu a fost doar o critică a metodologiilor tradiționale, ci și un sentiment afirmativ că istoria trebuie văzută ca un lanț de transformări radicale.

Cuvinte cheie: istorie disruptivă; interdisciplinaritate; metodologie; post-sovietism.

Introduction

For four years I was part of an interdisciplinary research team at the University of Tyumen in Siberia. My colleagues were Anthropologists, Literary Critics, Political Theorists, Philosophers, and other Historians. Our faculty was organized into several research teams, each of which worked on a different philosophical problem. One team, whose members included a physicist, a lawyer, and another historian, worked on the puzzle "Do humans have free will?". Another, which had a Shakespearean, an IT specialist, a management scholar, and an archaeologist, was answering the question "Is rationality a cultural construct?" For a while I was a member of a team focusing on the problem "What is love?" And to be honest, I have never enjoyed research more. But unfortunately, life in our team was cut a little short. Some of our members lost their contracts, others quit academia altogether, and others found new jobs far away from the ice and snow.

What was the point of our interdisciplinary adventure? And what might it reveal about how revisionism operates in the field of History today? Our institution was a small liberal arts college called the School of Advanced Studies (SAS), an island of English-language research and teaching within the wider state university. We existed to produce cutting-edge interdisciplinary articles and books, the type of work that was supposed to catch the attention

of global academic audiences. And although we were a scrambled set of teams, within this wider goal we shared another common mission. It was a mission our director underlined for us in regular faculty meetings, and which many of us took to heart: "*Disrupt your disciplines*!" Only by breaking the codes of our formal training, we were told, could we begin to generate truly ground-breaking work in our fields.

What did "disrupting our disciplines" mean in practice? While the idea was perhaps intentionally open, over the course of my four years at SAS I developed an increasingly vivid sense of what this involved. It meant sidestepping the technical vocabulary of our training, and trying to write in terms that would be understood by intellectually-engaged readers everywhere. It meant working in teams and addressing ourselves to problems that mattered not only to academics but also to wider stakeholders, especially in politics and industry. And it meant flipping all our old departmental colleagues' dogmas on their heads and experimenting with doing the opposite. If they drank coffee, we should drink tea. If they crunched statistics, we should do qualitative research. If they were Hegelians, we should pick up Carla Lonzi's book *Let's Spit on Hegel!* We were to be true "revisionists", challenging received wisdom and breaking hegemonic paradigms wherever we found them. As a brief, to me it seemed almost irresistible.

Of course there was a catch to all of this. But at least, it seemed, it was an obvious catch. *The impracticality of it all*. We were based in a small Siberian city, we had no proper English-language library, and nearly all of us were recent PhD graduates. While not being cossetted at a place like MIT seemed to be an advantage for launching a disciplinary revolution, our handicaps of location, accumulated faculty wisdom, and resources seemed a little steep. But as I continued working in Siberia a larger problem swam into view; a problem that might be familiar to anybody who has either studied at or experienced the functioning of Russian institutions in the Putin era.[1] Our disruptive academic project was itself disrupted; it was beset by obstacles, with a spate of firings and job cuts, perhaps motivated by the need to cut costs or perhaps by the pressure of being forced to meet extraordinary high standards, deflating the idealistic spirit of our first few months.

[1] This observation, connecting our school to wider Russian institutional challenges, was later made in print in Vladimir Gel'man, *The Politics of Bad Governance in Contemporary Russia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), p.132.

In this article I will contextualize our school's revisionism by exploring how it was influenced by two forms of "disruption": one inherited from the American business world, and the other from Late-Soviet theories of pedagogy. This will involve a deep dive into the 1990s, and an appreciation of how globalizing visionaries at Harvard Business School and post-Soviet management scholars on the outskirts of Moscow crafted complementary theories of institutional reform that have, arguably, mapped the educational dilemmas of the present moment. Addressing mechanics, I will next explain how these two revisionist principles operated in the day-to-day practice of our school, offering reflections on my own experiences and the research I produced while I was working at SAS. Finally, I will try to reflect on the larger logic of the "disruptive history" we produced in Tyumen, suggesting how some of these ideas of disruptive scholarship reflect current movements in the organization of academic research globally.

Disruption

"Disruption" first entered public discourse as a concept in 1995, with the publication of an article in the journal *Harvard Business Review*, "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave," by Joseph Bower and Clayton Christensen. According to Christensen, whose later book *The Innovator's Dilemma* sketched out the theory's parameters, disruption is a model of business innovation that favours under-resourced entrants into a market. Disruption begins when a small company enters at the lowest end of a market, with the specific mission of targeting new users or consumers. And disruption culminates when that company then builds up enough resources to scale up so that it can outcompete existing companies, both in terms of sales and performance. At its essence, therefore, disruption is one of the archetypical strategies of the business start-up. It is a foundational method for unsettling existing industries, characterized by introducing simpler or cheaper products as a way of making space for new revenue streams within markets.[2]

[2] See Joseph L. Bower and Clayton M. Christensen, 'Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave,' *Harvard Business Review* (January-February, 1995); and Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997). For more recent discussion, which points out among other details a spike of interest in

Netflix is a classic example of disruption. Founded in 1997, the same year as Christensen published *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Netflix set out to target the minority of consumers interested in obscure back-catalogue films. But this was only the opening gambit of the company's larger strategy. While building up resources from this stream of offbeat consumers, the directors were simultaneously pumping investment into advanced technological capabilities for processing and distributing video directly through the internet. All of this meant that when online streaming became a possibility in the late-2000s Netflix was primed to eviscerate their competitors, and notably the market-leader Blockbuster Video. From 9,000 stores worldwide in 2004, Blockbuster dwindled to just a single outlet still in operation today (located in Bend, Oregon, USA).[3] And few would disagree that this change in fortunes was down to Netflix's ruthless strategy. It should be clarified that disruption is more often a temporary process than a state of perpetual revolution; and after achieving market hegemony Netflix ultimately came to rely on the more established and stabilized business structures that had once characterized Blockbuster. Nevertheless, their disruptive approach was decisive, allowing them to blindside their opposition, capitalize on customers who wanted to pay the lowest prices, and then use those resources to capture the mainstream and high-end markets for themselves.[4]

Why dwell on Netflix like this? One of the defining assumptions of disruptive thinking, as this case shows, is that success is a zero-sum game. And "disrupters" often speak about corporate strategy using a "survival-of-the-fittest" vocabulary. As the scholar Joshua Gans has put it, businesses who confront disruption often find themselves in the position of "pandas and polar bears," struggling "to survive the depredations of humanity."[5] For

disruption around 2018, the first full calendar year of our school's operation, see Steven Si and Hui Chen, 'A Literature Review of Disruptive Innovation: What It Is, How it Works and Where it Goes,' *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management* 56 (2020). For the characterization of disruption as a method in start-ups, see Simone Sehnem et al., 'Disruptive Innovation and Circularity in Start-Ups: A Path to Sustainable Development,' *Business Strategy and the Environment* 31: 4 (2022): 1292–1307.

[3] Stephanie Clifford, 'Other Retailers Find Ex-Blockbuster Stores Just Right,' *The New York Times* (April 8, 2011).

[4] For a critical discussion of Netflix through the disruption model, making this same caveat, see Hendrik Michael, Sophie Reitmeier, and Miriam Czichon, 'Netflix and Kill?,' *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 68: 4 (2020).

[5] Joshua Gans, 'The Other Disruption,' *Harvard Business Review* (March 2016).

the disrupter to win, in this logic, it is automatically assumed that rival incumbent businesses will have to lose. As a consequence, the principle of disruptive innovation often ends up producing a business landscape in which creation is implicitly predicated on destruction, growth is built upon decline, and creation is based on extinction.

But disruption has another facet; a pattern that, on reflection, made it ideally suited for our under-resourced school in Siberia. Strategies of disruption are uniquely designed to suit the underdog. Whitney Johnson, the CEO of a company called Disruption Advisors, argues in her book *Disrupt Yourself* that resource constraints are usually considered productive advantages among disruptive companies, as they give businesses "something to push against." If a start-up doesn't have enough time, this can be an advantage as it allows them to strip down and focus on a single challenge. If they are short of money, this only "make[s] business owners impatient for profits," and consequently incentivizes rapid progress. Likewise, a lack of expertise can be useful as it introduces a fresh take on old challenges, empowering thinkers unencumbered by tired industry dogmas. Constraints, in other words, are "valuable tools of creation;" tools that can help disruptors gain ground on the established leaders within their industry.[6]

Over the past two decades, this Harvard theory of disruptive innovation has gradually become hegemonic at business schools globally.[7] This includes the Skolkovo School of Management, the developer of SAS Tyumen, which I will come to below. But the Harvard theory of disruption is not sufficient for understanding the logic of revisionism at our liberal arts college in Siberia on its own; it is also necessary to supplement it by exploring a second theory of disruption. Rather than a business model, this disruption originated in the sphere of education itself. And rather than the sunny optimistic climate of Clinton-era America, it emerged from the Soviet Union of Nikita Khrushchev, before being brought to institutional practice in the 1990s of Boris Yeltsin.

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[6] Whitney Johnson, *Disrupt Yourself* (London: Routledge, 2015), chapter 3.

[7] John Bessant, 'Disruptive innovation in the Higher Education Sector: The Case of the One Planet MBA,' in *Practicing Responsibility in Business Schools*, edited by Bjørn T. Asheim, Thomas Laudal, and Reidar J. Mykletun (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp.214–225.

"Methodology" was a transformative theory of institutional and educational reform, first developed in the late 1950s by the philosopher Georgiy Petrovich Shchedrovitsky (known to his followers as GP). It reached its highest articulation in the writings and organizational events produced by the Moscow Methodological Circle (MMC), which continued to publish and promote its work after Shchedrovitsky's death in 1994. At its essence, Methodology was a system for grounding all human projects in holistic, co-operative, and interdisciplinary problem-solving. As well as a radical blueprint for restructuring education and research in Russia and beyond, it stood as a Soviet-friendly alternative to the hegemonic western approaches that were then already dominating global approaches to the sciences and humanities.

What precisely did this mean? While it is difficult to reduce the complexity of either GP's thought or the MMC's vision to a core set of principles, a survey of Shchedrovitsky´s keystone lecture series, *Organization, Management, Control* (*Организация. Руководство. Управление*), suggests the following three maxims:

1) Researchers should take a problem-oriented approach, rather than a discipline-centric one. That is, instead of thinking about questions that have emerged internally within their disciplines, they should pay attention to larger real-world challenges that need solving, while remaining open about the academic or research techniques that may be required for solving them.
2) Researchers should operate within organized systems (or polysystems) of teams, structured around their problem-oriented approach. As different problems may require different systems, prompting different configuration of both organization and management, these systems should be agile, so that they may be adapted and customized fluidly.
3) Researchers should work co-operatively, blending the insights of different disciplines so that the product of one person's work may become the source material for others in a series of supportive connections.[8]

Methodology, therefore, was an attempt to "disrupt" all mental activity, from research and teaching to engineering projects, work programmes, and government policy. It demanded an enormous cultural shift, away from individualistic expertise and towards an interdisciplinary, systematized, and

[8] Г.П. Щедровицкий, *Организация. Руководство. Управление* (Москва, 2003).

co-operative intellectual praxis. Or rather, it sought out "the development of new means, methods and forms of *supra-subject* and *trans-professional* thinking".[9]

A few general philosophical points can be drawn from this brief overview. Methodology was, first of all, a theory that explicitly subordinated the individual to the team, as well as to the project or problem with which they were engaged. "In production," as GP put it, "I must make myself a cog and be extremely disciplined."[10] Addressing this specific problem of teambuilding, the MMC organized a series of popular "problem solving" seminars in Moscow in the 1980s. At these events, a group of participants (for example, the team members of a single university department) gathered together to play "organizational games," in which they experimented with their working methods by engaging in hypothetical solutions for often unsolvable problems. In one game, for example, participants were asked to come up with a way to decommission the power unit of the Beloyarsk Nuclear Power Plant.[11] Another involved coming up with ways to get the bodies of frozen mountain climbers down from the upper reaches of the Himalayas. By playing these games, teams were expected to become newly conscious of how they operated in the process. But they could also use these experiences to identify non-cooperatives, or otherwise troublesome team players, allowing for new techniques of organization or management control.

Reflecting on Shchedrovitsky's theory of Methodology from the vantage point of sixty years later, it's tempting to compare it to another experiment in "disruptive innovation" from the Soviet era: *Perestroika*, the attempt to restructure the economic system under Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s.[12] Like Gorbachev, GP was passionately committed to reinvigorating what he believed was the lost spirit of Soviet collectivism. And like *perestroika*,

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[9] А.Ч. Зинченко, *Путеводитель по основным понятиям и схемам методологии Организации, Руководства и Управления* (Москва: Дело, 2004), p.169. Also, for wider context and a retrospective reflection on the contribution of the MMC from a member, see Vadim M. Rozin, 'The Moscow Methodological Circle: Its Main Ideas and Evolution,' *Social Epistemology* 31:1 (2017), pp.78–92.

[10] Г.П. Щедровицкий, *Организация. Руководство. Управление*, p.34.

[11] This example is from Илья Венявкин, 'Человек, который придумал деукраинизировать Украину,' *Холод* 10/06/22 [Ilya Venyakvin, "The Person Who Conceived the Destruction of Ukraine"], https://holod.media/2022/06/10/sergeitsev/ [Accessed March 2024].

[12] Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR* (UNC Chapel Hill Press, 2016); Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

Shchedrovitsky's Methodology was an ambitious and wide-ranging attempt to unify something that had become fractured. It was meant to "integrate the split off branches of science and technology," GP claimed, in a bid to devise both a "common language and homogenous methods of thinking for all spheres of activity and work" to "finally create a single reality for modern science, technology, and practical activity."[13] Finally, both Gorbachev and GP wanted a type of reform that would embrace technological acceleration. While *perestroika* sought to shock the USSR out of is Brezhnev era stagnation and into a rapidly emerging, technologically-dependent world, advocates of Methodology embraced new technologies, to the point (critics have argued) of seeing the human itself as a technological entity to be engineered and manipulated.[14]

But *perestroika* hardly translated into the Russia of Yeltsin, let alone the Russia of Putin's fourth or fifth term as president. By contrast, GP's core ideas were still proving decisively influential in educational practice in Russia in the 2010s. One latter-day disciple of the MMC, a lecturer at Baikal State University named Uri Beryozkin, described in a 2016 lecture series to his graduate students how GP's problem-based, interdisciplinary agenda was currently being adopted by "a number of institutions" across Russia. He singled out the Skolkovo School of Management in Moscow, where he said the Methodological approach was still being used to "unstick" (or disrupt) practices of knowledge that were otherwise at risk of becoming static.

> In Russia before the revolution, and even now, in today's Russia — in particular in the Skolkovo business school, for example — they use such a technique: They invite experts working with different, sometimes directly opposed approaches to give alternative lectures discussing the same discipline. One speaks from his own position, while the other speaks from the opposite position about the same thing. And due to such a "clash" of consciousness, it is possible to peel off what is "stuck" and tear it off.[15]

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[13] Г.П. Щедровицкий, "Принципы и общая схема методологической организации системно-структурных исследований и разработок" [G.P. Shchedrovitsky, "Methodological organization of system-structural research and development: principles and general framework"], *Sistemnyie Issledovania*, 1981: 193-227. Translated by Anatol Rapoport, https://www.fondgp.ru/old/lib/int/4/ [Accessed March 2024].

[14] This criticism is made in Венявкин, "Человек."

[15] Ю.М. Берёзкин, *Методология Научных Исследований (Деятельностный Подход)* (Иркутск: БГУ, 2016), 8. [Uri Mikhailovich Beryozkin, *Methodological Scientific Studies*]

How could a fifty-year-old theory still be so influential? Beryozkin made a point of noting that GP's son Pyotr ("a Methodologist since childhood," as he describes him) was a key mover and shaker in Russian academia, working hard to promote his father's model of innovation. As well as presiding over a foundation dedicated to GP's thought, Pyotr was head of a department at the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk, and a professor at Skolkovo School of Management. Most importantly, he was an advisor on education policy at the Kremlin, where he was so influential, at least according to Beryozkin's assessment, that "whatever the Minister of Education and Science is doing now with universities is largely his prompting."[16] Pyotr, it should be noted, resigned any affiliation with Russian governmental institutions on February 24th 2022, hours after the invasion of Ukraine.[17]

But the most direct link, connecting the approach I experienced at the School of Advanced Studies in Tyumen with GP's theory of Methodology, was a man named Andrei Volkov. An intellectual with extraordinary energy, Volkov once climbed Mount Everest and often used this as a metaphor for overcoming challenges in the world of education. Originally trained in engineering, he first attended one of GP's organizational games in 1990. He soon became a passionate advocate for Methodology and began putting the principles into practice, first working as part of a team that built and remodelled the Togliatti Academy of Management in Russia's Samara Oblast between 1992–96.[18] Volkov went on to become the founding Dean at Skolkovo Business School in 2006, where interdisciplinary teaching and research and real-word problem-based learning became foundational.[19]

By the 2010s Volkov was advocating an even more ambitious shift in the structure and approach of universities in Russia. And although he was doing so largely along GP's lines, he also at this point began blending in the kind of agenda more familiar to the Harvard Business School. Russia's

[16] Берёзкин, *Методология*, 19–20.

[17] See Pyotr's interview with Mikhail Zygar, dated June 22nd 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQxR4PPj_9Y [Accessed March 2024].

[18] Details from Andrey Volkov's profile at the website dedicated to the Moscow Methodological Circle, https://www.fondgp.ru/mmk/persons/волков-андрей-евгеньевич/ [Accessed March 2024].

[19] See comments by Elizabeth Redden, 'Reform at the Top,' *Inside Higher Ed* (January 29, 2013), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/30/new-russian-technical-university-has-high-aspirations [Accessed March 2024].

university policy was far too centralized, he argued, and greater autonomy and space for experimentation would be required for institutions to compete on the global stage.[20] An important motivator for this shift, Volkov felt, was the fact that universities needed to begin training people for a transforming economy. What Russia needed, he said, was "an increase in practice-oriented education under the control of employers," and a teaching environment where education would be "tailored to [the] needs" of corporations. In this new university future, Volkov believed that "educational standards" themselves should no longer be "developed by the ministry," but rather built by measuring up to "professional standards."[21]

And this is where we come to my own institution in Tyumen. Volkov's passion for reform found a new outlet in 2016, when one of his colleagues at Skolkovo, a PhD graduate from Berkeley named Andrey Shcherbenok, began collaborating with the rector of Tyumen State University Valery Falkov to set up the School of Advanced Studies.[22] Conceived as a Greenfield project, both in the sense that it was to be an entirely new institution and that it would be built in the relatively underexploited location of western Siberia, SAS Tyumen was effectively a laboratory for putting Volkov's revolutionary schema to the test.[23] It was propelled by funding from Russia's 5–100 Project, the state-backed initiative to get five Russian universities ranked among the global top 100 by the year 2020.[24] And it set about hiring faculty with a distinctly Shchedrovitsky-inspired approach. Candidates for permanent academic positions were invited to a Project Design Session in Tyumen in March 2017. Led by Shcherbenok, the candidates were

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[20] Andrei Volkov and Dara Melnyk, 'University Autonomy and Accountability in Russian Higher Education,' *International Higher Education* 94 (2018), pp.31–33.

[21] 'Нерешаемые задачи как основа высшего образования,' *Вопроси Образовня* 1:1 (2013), pp.273–278. ["Unsolvable Problems as a Basis of Higher Education," Interview with Andrei Volkov conducted by E.N. Penskaya].

[22] For an overview of SAS and its mission, see Victoria Burnside Clapp, Alexandra Kozulina, and Nikki Lohr, 'Reimagining Russian Higher Education: Could an experiment in progressive education in Siberia help transform Russia's universities?'. *Stanford Us-Russia Forum Journal*. 12: 1 (2020).

[23] See the pamphlet, Andrei Volkov and Denis Konanchuk, *Greenfield Era in Education* (Moscow: Skolkovo Education Development Centre, 2014).

[24] Andrey Volkov, Yaroslav Kuzminov, and Maria Yudkevich, 'A Project for the Elite that Changed the System as a Whole: A Case Study of Project 5–100,' in *Academic Star Wars: Excellence Initiatives in Global Perspective*, edited by Maria Yudkevich, Philip G. Altbach, Jamil Salmi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), pp.203–225.

given three days to form teams and devise collaborative interdisciplinary projects of their own. Presentations were filmed and broadcast over a local network, and a month later more than a dozen individuals, from Belgium, Ireland, Poland, the UK, and the USA, as well as Russia, were offered jobs to join the new institution in the coming September.

A Siberian Research Lab

So far, I have outlined two very different principles of "disruption". One — inherited from the American business world and typically associated with Silicon Valley start-ups — takes disruption as the tool of the underdog, weaponizing a lack of resources in a strategic approach to cornering markets and destroying commercial opponents. The other — inherited from Late-Soviet Russia — takes disruption as a mode of radical institutional reform, in which an old system, defined by conventional disciplinary thinking, individualistic project efforts, and the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, is upended by an interdisciplinary, collaborative, system-based and problem-oriented approach to knowledge. But how did these two approaches impact the research of those who worked at the School of Advanced Studies in Siberia? And how, for those of us who were historians, did they influence our revisionism?

At this point I am going to provide a series of personal anecdotes and reflections. While they represent my own experiences, they also form a partial dialogue with the view of our institution sketched in an article published by my colleague, Natalia Savalyeva.[25] Some of what I have to say may sound critical, and some of it may sound like an apology for the institution. I have to admit, I was a passionate advocate of the type of scholarship (and the revisionist history it produced) while I worked in Siberia, and I genuinely believed that as a community of scholars we could build academic bridges, open international dialogues, and even maybe contribute to the making of an alternative Russian future. But I also admit that the whole experience sometimes wore me down to the point of depression, exasperation, and even

[25] Natalia Savalyeva, 'How 'Love What You Do' Went Wrong in an 'Academic Sweatshop' in Siberia,' *Open Democracy* (13 Marc 2020): https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-love-what-you-do-went-wrong-in-an-academic-sweatshop-in-siberia/ [Accessed March 2024].

despair. All the same, I hold no ill will towards anybody at SAS, past or present, and with respect to my former colleagues, the students, to the staff, and to the management of our school, I will try to be as candid and objective as I possibly can.

The first time I sensed any influence of Harvard's "disruptive innovation" agenda at SAS was in an early faculty meeting in late 2017. Our director had encouraged us all to watch the movie Moneyball (dir. Bennett Miller, 2011), and he had set aside time for us to meet and discuss our reactions. In the film, Brad Pitt plays the role of Billy Beane, an unorthodox baseball general manager in charge of a struggling team named Oakland Athletics. With weaker players than their rivals, and poorer resources, the Athletics are obviously disadvantaged. But, through statistical in-game analysis pioneered by Beane in conjunction with a Yale economics graduate named Peter Brand (Jonah Hill), they manage to win a record 20 consecutive games and top the American League West. Essentially, they achieve this by exploiting the peculiar strengths of their existing players, while crunching analytics of match scenarios to reveal the simple hacks that will give their team marginal gains. Moneyball is therefore a classic "rags to riches" tale, although with the twist that it is cunning and logical skill, rather than moral probity or inherent talent, that is shown as the key ingredient of success.

After we all shared our initial responses to *Moneyball*, our director made the analogy to our own situation crystal clear. "Look at yourselves" he said. "Aren't you also the underdogs, like them? Aren't you the underdogs of global academia? I mean, have any of you published your books with Cambridge University Press yet?" This may have been an awkward thing to say, but it was also technically true. Given that we were scholars near the bottom of the pile, though, what were we supposed to do about it? What was *Moneyball's* inspirational message, exactly? For an underdog Siberian institution to compete with Harvard or Oxford, we needed to find a similar method for capitalizing on our strengths and exploiting marginal gains. And that day, in that overheated seminar room of a Soviet-era library building, we were told that we as a group currently had two unique assets. We had an unexpected cohesion, as a set of outsiders all gathered in a relatively strange place. And we had our unique research team model, which compelled us to work outside our disciplines. What we needed to do now, it seemed, was to enter the relatively under-developed "market" of interdisciplinary group projects in the humanities. Then our start-up could begin to grow wings.

If this business model was easy enough to grasp from the start of my time at SAS, our school's Methodological agenda only dawned on me gradually. My first vivid awakening came on Christmas Day 2017. Two men flew over from Skolkovo in Moscow that morning, offering to run a workshop for our research team. At that time, our team's question was "What is Love?" Standing next to a flipchart, one of the two men asked the five of us "What is the problem you want to solve? The real-world problem?" And then he motioned out of the window, towards the cars below our building. "*The problem out there*." For three hours, as my colleagues explained the value of new theories of materiality in the humanities, I tried to make medieval ideas of love fit a distinct real-world challenge. It was refreshing, daunting, and felt counter-intuitive to my academic training. But what I eventually came up with, although both awkward and naïve, was an idea I was attracted to. *Theories of love in the 1100s were about overcoming the self through a mystical engagement with the natural world; Can we reimagine our relation to the climate by reading Bernard of Clairvaux?*

An important maxim at SAS was striving to work harder than our counterparts back in our home countries. Our director had previously been a Society of Fellows scholar at Columbia University in New York, and his contention was that their formula — giving scholars ideal amounts of time, money, and space to work — ended up producing lazy professors and mediocre research. He believed, understandably for a product of Skolkovo and GP's framework of Methodological theory, that academics needed to be managed. And so consequently our faculty's time was highly organized. Aside from a packed teaching schedule (our quota ultimately rose to 256 hours per year for each professor), we were asked to pitch videos for popular science websites and produce open lecture series. We were also invited to do tours of schools and festival talks in Moscow, where we would make the case for our innovative teaching and group projects. For my part, I was asked to make a YouTube video series on the Seven Deadly Sins, with 24 lectures thinly spread across a seven-week period. As I loved giving lectures, this was probably good management of me as a resource. But as I often had to stay up until 3am preparing, it may not have been the best management of me as a human.

For many of us at SAS, all these research and teaching commitments came to disrupt our personal lives. But what happened to those of us who felt burned out? An important feature of the movie Moneyball is that Brad Pitt's coach character ruthlessly protects the team spirit at all costs. If he buts

up against an uncooperative player he fires him, especially if that player otherwise commands the respect of the team. The logic of these firings, at least in the movie, dovetails with a major principle of disruptive innovation: trimming away elements that hinder a company's ability to focus on its collective goals.[26] At SAS Tyumen, the faculty were expected to buy into the interdisciplinary project idea wholesale, and to focus on it with a similar intensity. Our contracts contained a stipulation: any faculty member in the second year of their contract or later who failed to publish at least one article per year in a Q1 or Q2 journal would have their bonus salary removed for the following year, an intervention that amounted to an effective 80% pay cut. Unfortunately, these pay cuts (or similar punitive measures) were imposed on quite a few colleagues.

From a business standpoint, there may be nothing shocking about this type of intervention. Within the sphere of academic research, the threat of an 80% salary reduction seemed like an unwelcome novelty; especially as some journals could slip from Q2 to Q3 in the time it took to accept an article for publication. It was certainly a double-edged sword from a management perspective, as it drove faculty to apply for new jobs while desperately trying to crank out articles. Overall, however, this policy made total sense within the framework of Harvard's disruptive innovation. Because the real untapped market the school wanted to exploit — their secret weapon against the big hitters — was not so much the interdisciplinary research, or the Methodological system-based teaching model (although both were genuinely valuable). It was the abundance of well-qualified and talented English-speaking PhDs, who, due to low demand for permanent positions in the US and UK throughout the late 2010s and early 2020s, had few alternative job prospects.

But it would be too simplistic and cynical to reduce SAS to this logic. While many of us who worked under these conditions were tempted to blame our immediate bosses, the real problem was much more likely systemic. As Vladimir Gel'man's recent study of Russian institutional change in the Putin era has observed, ambitious projects like SAS have been hampered by short-term thinking and by the general instability of the Russian political landscape. With "time horizon[s] … limited by the terms and conditions of personalist rule," such initiatives often clash against those in power, who tend to choose only "those policy priorities that may bring quick and visible returns

[26] Johnson, *Disrupt Yourself*, ch.3.

accompanied by a number of demonstrative effects."[27] In other words, the ambitions of SAS were likely beset by resource issues, and by a funding model that favoured immediate results rather than the kind of slow-burning investment in researchers that the best institutions typically rely upon. Although the underdog logic of disruptive innovation may have initially justified this approach, making a truly innovative Shchedrovitsky experiment work might have required, like Netflix, a more gradual and patient approach.

Disruptive Research Outputs

Up to this point in the article I have spoken exclusively about methods and theories, models and initiatives. But what about the actual historical research itself? What kind of writing came out of our experiment at SAS? And did it manage to disrupt anything at all, or else help to advance any innovative species of historical work? Detailing the historical methods of our teams in Tyumen, I am going to reflect both on the published writing and the ongoing research of myself and my colleagues. Ultimately, I will try to evaluate where — if at all — this work fitted within James Banner's recent taxonomy of revisionism.

At SAS I was a member of two research teams: *Material Relations* (2017–2019), which attempted to find new approaches to materiality and especially the ontology of the nonhuman; and *Laboratories of Democracy* (2019–2021), which aimed at providing reinvigorated perspectives on democracy's value and definition. Working with both these teams I discovered two specific applications for historical work, one more disruptive (in both the senses I have discussed above) than the other. The first of these I came to think of as "historical spadework". Most often this involved using history as a tool for situating present-day problems in a wider or deeper context. Along with my colleague, the historian of pre-modern Russia Evgeny Grishin, I was often asked to add background colour, advising team mates to make sure their debates were sufficiently grounded. While one colleague was writing a piece on the materiality of love, for example, we discussed how loving relations had been mediated through objects in pre-modern Europe, such as relics or pilgrimage badges. Admittedly this was

[27] Gel'man, *Politics of Bad Governance*, pp.123–124.

not always the most demanding use of a historian's skill set, and sometimes it felt a little like we were adding nothing more than window dressing. But if it was ever useful, it was when it could help colleagues challenge assumptions that contemporary problems were entirely unique to the conditions of capitalism.[28]

But within these teams we also found a second, and far more "disruptive" application for history. Case studies from the deep past, we believed, could become theory-making tools for the present, upending the "presentism" of contemporary philosophical discussions by exposing radical alternative approaches.[29] I tried to practice exactly this method of history in an article I wrote for *The Journal of Material Culture*, a journal outside my field.[30] Our discussions in the *Material Relations* team had suggested it would be worth trying to "disrupt" a conversation taking place among anthropologists, political theorists, and philosophers about the ontology of nonhumans. Debates among these scholars, our team noticed, tended to reduce "western" thought to a set of canonical philosophers from the modern capitalist era, and if they considered medieval thinkers at all they only produced the most likely names, such as Augustine, Aquinas, or Duns Scotus. Adjoined to this point, we also noticed that most of the major theorists in this field —from Graham Harman to Jane Bennett — used a critical vocabulary that lacked either religious metaphysical sophistication or historical contextualization. The debate was ripe, in other words, for some historical disruption. So, in the article I explored three medieval encounters with material objects, illustrating how these perspectives could add something new for thinking about the emotional life of things. As I argued, they revealed an assumption deep within western thought of the need for self-erasure in the process of accommodating the nonhuman; an

[28] One article along these lines was published by my teammate, Zachary Low Reyna, 'Toward a More Robust New Materialist Politics: How the Practice of Criminal Animal Trials Can Inform Contemporary Politics,' *Stasis* 1: 9 (2020), pp.105–127. Reyna's article doesn't cite any of our team's historical input, and it's not clear whether we influenced his discussion at all. But his concluding claim, that theorists now need to "deliver on the conventional humanist dreams that have long inspired Western thinking," acknowledges the importance of these historical perspectives, and owes a broader debt to our group work.

[29] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[30] Peter J.A. Jones, 'Bones, Fire, and Falcons: Loving Things in Medieval Europe,' *Journal of Material Culture* 26: 4 (2021), pp.433–450.

assumption that, while it needn't be embraced, could be useful both for reframing and for situating contemporary philosophies.

We adopted a broader goal of historical disruption in the other research team I worked with at SAS, "Laboratories of Democracy". Under the rubric of surveying alternative theories and practices of democracy, we interrogated a series of case studies from marginal experiments in communal living across American, European, and Russian history. Motivated in part by an idea from Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *History Manifesto* — "a longer history of international government" might reveal "a fuller expression of the concept of democracy itself" — our ambition was to save democracy from what we saw as a restrictive historical myopia, one that typically fixed the concept to the narrow scope of Pericles and Toqueville.[31] With this (rather grand) aim in mind, I wrote an article for *Past & Present* on a twelfth-century democratic revolution, attempting to retrieve an implicit medieval philosophy of egalitarian politics hidden within the chronicles, sermons, and poems of ecclesiastics.[32] As a piece of revisionism, this struck at an orthodoxy in the field of medieval history. Using the word "democracy" to describe political mechanisms in the pre-modern west, leading historians had argued, was always a form of teleology.[33] And although this article was unlikely to punch through to readers beyond my own field, its wider aim was not so much to challenge medievalists but to provide an alternative conceptual framework for contemporary political theorists to use themselves.

And yet perhaps the biggest disruption our research groups sought to implement was methodological. In 2018, our *Material Relations* team began work on what we called the "Love Tree," a project that wanted to introduce a nonlinear and provisional way of reading scholarship. Approaching the impossible philosophical question "What is Love?", this book project would be structured like a choose-your-own-adventure novel. At the end of each page of writing (which might be a piece of history, philosophy, anthropology,

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[31] Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.75–76; Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), e.g., pp.305–312.

[32] Peter J. A. Jones, 'Is Paradise a Democracy? The Heavenly City as Political Paradigm, c.1140–50,' *Past & Present*, 262:2 (2024), pp.#.

[33] See for instance Chris Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World: The Emergence of Italian City Communes in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, 2015), pp.4–6.

or political theory), the reader would be given a choice. Which angle would you like to take on this issue next? Following their choices through the branches of thought, each reader would come away having read a totally unique book. The *Love Tree* was never completed at SAS; but it is a project two of us — myself and the anthropologist duskin drum — are still working on, and although it may take us a further twenty years to complete, our intention is not so much to finish but to continue challenging our own disciplinary boundaries and modes of thought as we grow into the project.

Where do any of these projects fit into ideas of revisionism in the field of History today? While I have been impressionistic on the question of revisionism up to this point, I would like to finish by engaging with categories recently established by the American historian James Banner. According to his book *The Ever-Changing Past*, historical revisionism usually comes in five varieties. The first and most radical is "Transformative revisionism," which he defines as "an interpretive revolution that forever alter[s] the entire culture of a major segment of the world's population."[34] What Banner specifically has in mind here are huge civilizational models, such as Christianity or Marxism, which offer entirely new and independent frameworks and systems of thought for interpreting historical processes. Equally seismic, in Banner's view, is a second form, which he calls "Philosophical revisionism." As a type of disruptive historical writing, this form of revisionism attacks pre-existing rationales for studying history itself. As Banner sees it, philosophical revisionism usually operates in a cycle, whereby historians either defend the critique first introduced by Thucydides, who "thought the study of political power more important" in history, or defending Herodotus, who instead had prioritized "thought, culture, and society". At essence, this form of revisionism is really a referendum on what historians value, and where they place emphasis in processing the cultural and political shifts of the past.[35]

If Banner's first two strains disrupt history's meaning, his third disrupts its shape. "Conceptual revisionism" occurs when distinct social categories provide new historical standpoints — such as social history, gender history, Black history, or LGBTQ+ history — that provide alternative lenses for viewing the past. Beyond simply uncovering overlooked avenues of

[34] James M. Banner, Jr., *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p.144.
[35] Banner, pp.150–151.

enquiry, these forms of historiography ultimately seek to revise received narratives, exposing how those narratives have been predicated on a set of normative assumptions (usually of white, wealthy, educated, enfranchised, and male subjectivities).[36] Beyond this, Banner's final two strains are more technical and practical in nature. "Evidence-based revisionism" is the form of critique whereby the discovery of new sources of primary material upends pre-existing discussions.[37] Finally, "Method-driven revisionism" is the type of disruption in which historians adopt novel tools (such as econometrics or DNA analysis), or else insights from other disciplines (such as psychological theory or the anthropological method), to construct new narratives of the past.[38]

Where precisely does the revisionism we conducted as historians at SAS Tyumen fit into this web? I am tempted to add a sixth column to Banner's schema, related to the professional status of the historian him or herself. "Profession-based revisionism," as I might call it, encompasses the disruptive work of historians who, compelled by precarious employment contracts to moonlight in other fields, to write provocative articles, and to attempt to remake historical methods in the process, end up expanding our sense of what a historian is for. But to work with Banner's diagnosis of our discipline, it seems our experiment in "disruptive history" was really intended first of all to produce works of "Method-driven revisionism." Adopting novel tools and insights, we were meant not only to supplement the knowledge basis of our disciplines but also to push at their working frameworks, developing formats — such as the *Love Tree* — that would bend the typical rules of the genre.

But beyond this technical requirement, our larger goal at SAS was to produce something more like a thoroughgoing philosophical critique of our discipline, or Banner's category of "Philosophical revisionism". We were prompted to reflect on the biggest themes: What is history *for*? *Who* is it for? And who or what does it fix as the stars of historical transformation? And our projects were meant to produce history for new and wider audiences, explaining the past in ways that made sense to a technologized, globalized, and networked world. We emphasized rupture and experimentation, trans-national encounters and systems of thought, creating a prism through which history came to seem like a chain of radical and transformative innovations. Guiding this philosophy, as I have shown, were two models inherited from

[36] Banner, pp.152–162.
[37] Banner, pp.162–163.
[38] Banner, pp.163–172.

the post-Cold War superpowers of the 1990s: the collectivist ethos spread by Shchedrovitsky's disciples and the competitive logic of the Silicon Valley start-ups; both of which embodied logics of global free enterprise and a radical sense of technological and institutional progress. From the perspective of invigorating the discipline, these experiments may seem refreshing. "Interpretive orthodoxy," according to James Banner, "is the diagnostic of intellectual rigor mortis."[39] But what else were we helping to do to the body of history?

[39] Banner, p.264.